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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Regional Gender Inequality in the Norwegian Culture of Equality

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**Abstract** This research project has its origin in statistical findings indicating that there has been a long-standing regional variation in the attainment of gender equality in Norway whereby the southern region has been identified as the least gender-equal. This is likely to be caused by an interaction of economic, political and cultural structures. Nevertheless, the understanding of this phenomenon remains incomplete since the cultural dimension too often ends up as a residual category or a dependent variable. The project seeks to explore the cultural dimension by asking how persons themselves understand and justify gender inequalities and everyday life choices. By drawing on ‘repertoires of justification’, as developed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, the present analysis provides insight into how culturally embedded values are mobilised when parents discuss labour and domestic responsibility.

**Keywords** Gender (in-) equality · Division of labour · French pragmatic theory · Norway

## Introduction

Over the last 40 years or so, increasing female participation in the labour market has been at the core of Nordic welfare policy [32]. Like in most Western countries,

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combining motherhood with full or part time employment has become the preferred lifestyle for the majority of women [4], giving rise to an extensive development of work–family research (see for instance [24, 30, 38, 50]). The dominant ideal of family life in Western society is the ‘dual adult worker family model’ [21, 37].<sup>1</sup> One implication of the changes has been a transition in the role of women. Discussing Norway in particular, Knudsen and Wærness point out that ‘Economic co-provision and equal involvement of parents in childcare and housework is a dominating family *ideal* in the public discourse and an important assumption underpinning more and more of the welfare policy’ [32: 41]).

Under the banner of ‘*Arbeid til alle!*’ (*Work for everyone!*), the intention behind labour-related politics—the very basis of the Norwegian model—has been to achieve a low level of unemployment [3:18]). One consequence of the centralised wage negotiations in Norway was a gradual process of ‘salary flattening’, which over time generated (one of) the most egalitarian examples of income distribution in the capitalist world [3:18]. The rapid increase in female employment, especially in the health care professions in the welfare state, was accompanied by demands for equal pay.<sup>2</sup> The Gender Equality Act (Likestillingsloven) adopted in 1978 contained a special provision on equal pay for work of equal value. The political scientist Helga [26] invented the term ‘state feminism’ to describe the existence of a large number of laws to promote equality between men and women in Norway. Gender equality has also been promoted through increased day care services, long parental leave, affirmative action and more. It is not unusual to argue that a *women-friendly policy from above* in partnership with a *mobilisation of women from below* has made Norway a more gender-equal society compared to many other countries [29, 45].<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is fair to say that gender equality constitutes an important repertoire of evaluation deeply institutionalised and embedded in the Norwegian culture, and frequently mobilised in political debates and in the public sphere in general. This leads us to expect that cultural deviations from the dominant ideal of family life are in strong need of justification. The present study seeks to provide insight into the different ways parents from the least gender-equal region in Norway, Agder, understand and justify their roles in work and family life. The divergence of Agder in comparison with the majority norm, makes it an interesting case for the study of justification patterns.

## Background

Women in all European countries have the primary responsibility for housing and care-giving. In Norway, women do three times as much domestic work as men [31]. Our study covers the southern part of Norway—the Agder counties—which is the

<sup>1</sup> Even if in many Western European countries a modified male breadwinner model—that is, a one-and-a-halfearner model—has become the norm [36].

<sup>2</sup> For differences between the Scandinavian dual breadwinner societies, see Ellingsæter [13].

<sup>3</sup> Even if women are still underrepresented in various power elites, the labour market is still gendered and many female workers struggle to combine work, family and leisure.

region with the largest statistical gender differences [51],<sup>4</sup> and the most traditional gender role pattern in Norway. The employment rate for women is lower there than elsewhere in the country, the proportion of women working part-time is higher, income differences between men and women are greater, and women's participation in municipal government is low [41]. The municipalities in the region that have the highest rate of employment among women are those with a diverse labour market and good day care facilities [41, p. 210]. Indeed, a recent study shows that there is a positive correlation between a homogeneous labour market and women's part-time work [10], indicating that the diversity of the labour market has an impact on female employment rates. Men and women in parts of the region uphold traditional attitudes to family life and maternity leave, people vote more conservatively and, compared to other regions, they are far more religiously active [18, 39]. In summary, previous research supports the theory that an interaction between *economic, political and cultural factors* have contributed to the development of a homogeneous labour market, slow development in the supply of day care services, a traditional division of domestic labour, and conservative attitudes towards raising children ([10, 16, 18, 19, 39–41, 42, 44, 46, 47].

While it is well documented that Agder has the most traditional gender role pattern in Norway, less is known about how people themselves understand and perceive gender inequality. Values and norms are embedded culturally and to fully understand the phenomenon of gender inequality we need to unfold the cultural dimension.<sup>5</sup> In this article we follow the actors' own justifications and perceptions of their life choices related to work, family-life and raising children. Empirically we draw on in-depth interviews with eight women and six men. The analysis of the interviews is informed by a French pragmatist approach in cultural sociology. Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot have shown that practices of appreciation, judgement, and critique reveal patterns that follow national cultural repertoires of evaluation [35: 8–9]. They analysed the characteristic requirements of the most legitimate forms of evaluation in some public debates in France and USA. A prioritized issue was to understand how actors mobilise the notion of common human dignity to assess standards of evaluation [35: 7]. They argue that only a limited number of evaluation repertoires based on notions of a common good do exist cross-nationally. But the content of the repertoires, how often and in what kinds of situation they are being mobilised in processes of justification and critique, vary between countries and regions. Following this pragmatist approach in cultural sociology, we argue that justifications of gender-based life choices depend on several repertoires of evaluation that are culturally embedded in Norway, and we intend to explain how they are mobilised in this particular Norwegian region by showing how informants mobilise different criteria in discussions about gender, work and family life. The conservative and gender-based role typical of this region is anchored in a Norwegian culture where mechanisms of equalisation seem to be valuable and legitimate (see for instance [8, 11, 49]. Consequently, the regional deviation from the national norm, supposedly, needs to be justified. The study in

<sup>4</sup> See Statistics Norway on 'Gender equality index for Norwegian municipalities 2010': [http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/02/10/likekom\\_en/](http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/02/10/likekom_en/).

<sup>5</sup> In such a cultural sociological approach culture must itself be regarded as an independent variable [2].

Agder expands our knowledge of work–family relations by discussing how the informants cope with being part of a regional culture of gender inequality in a society where gender equality is high on the political agenda.

## Data, Methods and Methodology

Information was collected through in-depth interviews with six men and eight women from two towns in the Agder region: the largest town in the region, and a smaller village. All informants live in heterogeneous couples and have children. The sample includes informants with different educational levels and work affiliation. Following a snowball sampling procedure, we collected data by asking acquaintances and relatives to send a letter containing information about the project to women and men who fit our predefined characteristics. With their consent, we subsequently contacted them by telephone. If the person concerned accepted to be interviewed, we made an appointment. The interviews were conducted individually (not couples).

Obviously, some limitations follow from such a design. The sample is small and not representative. Our intention, however, has not been to draw generalisations based on this material, but rather to explore the informants own perspectives and how they negotiate meaning, and thus to develop an understanding of how life choices are being justified. In the analysis a ‘grounded’ approach was used in which empirical data serve as a point of departure for developing hypotheses and concepts, trying at the same time to avoid aprioristic notions about the regional culture of gender inequality. From this inductive approach we embark on a more deductive track in this article, seeking to explore whether the French pragmatist approach outlined above can shed a light on our findings that contributes to broaden our understanding of people’s life choices. Indeed, we have been influenced by Lamont’s [33, 34] methodological design in her study of the French and American middle and working classes, and we draw on Boltanski and Thévenot’s [7] approach for studying actors’ practices of justification.<sup>6</sup> We invited the informants to participate in a conversation, encouraging them to explain why they organize their life as they do, and thereby obtaining insight into their practices of justification and boundary-drawing. This approach enables informants to describe their relations to work, family life, child-rearing, and gender at some length and in their own words. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. They were thematically structured, and focused primarily on the division of work within the family and on parenting, paying particular attention to the informants’ justification of how they chose to live their lives: who worked less than full-time, and why; who did what in the home sphere and why; who did what with the children, and why. Inspired by the so-called ‘life form interview’ [23], we probed into concrete everyday situations, asking who did what in the morning of the interview, and who did what in the preceding afternoon and evening. Following up this line of questioning, we went on to ask them if their answers reflected the usual

<sup>6</sup> See Godechot [22] for a review.

**Table 1** Female informants

Place	Age	Children	Work (%)	Partner's employment (%)
1. Small village (W1SV)	30–40	2	50–60	100
2. Small village (W2SV)	40–50	4	100	100
3. Small village (W3SV)	40–50	3	100	100
4. Small village (W4SV)	50–60	2	90–100	100
5. Town (W5T)	30–40	3	90	50 employment, 50 studies
6. Town (W6T)	30–40	2	0	100+
7. Town (W7T)	30–40	2	100	100
8. Town (W8T)	30–40	4	20+	100

*W* women, *SV* small village. *T* town (the largest town in the Agder counties (82,000 inhabitants))

**Table 2** Male informants

Place	Age	Children	Work (%)	Partner's employment (%)
1. Small village (M1SV)	40–50	2	100	100
2. Small village (M2SV)	40–50	3	100	100
3. Small village (M3SV)	50–60	3	100	80
4. Town (M4T)	30–40	2	100	100
5. Town (M5T)	40–50	3	100	80
6. Town (M6T)	40–50	3	80	67

*M* men, *SV* small village, *T* town

division of work and gave them the opportunity to justify the way in which they organised their family lives. The Tables 1 and 2 below give an overview of the sample.

## Theoretical Approach

In order to develop an understanding of the connections between the division of work and family care between genders in a region of Norway often labelled as ‘traditional’, it is important to understand which cultural repertoires and valuation patterns that are dominant in this part of Norway. In cultural studies of the USA and France, different analyses have focused on the relations between divergent value-setting systems. Lamont [33, 34] has researched symbolic boundaries, defined as ways in which groups create and maintain lines of demarcation between themselves and others. Boltanski and Thévenot [7] developed an analysis of the ‘repertoire of justification’ (hierarchies of value). This theoretical framework, known as ‘pragmatic sociology’, was developed in response to the (post-) structuralist theories associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, which were strongly focused on identifying hidden power and interests. In contrast, Boltanski and Thévenot developed a sociology about critique, or an ‘anthropology of justification’ [54: 114]. Rather than revealing hidden structures that regulate social behavior, the pragmatic sociologists were

concerned about exploring how people construct and use categories to legitimize their own arguments and social behavior as well as criticizing that of others. In this practice of legitimation social actors refer to certain moral values, rules and categories that represent a ‘common good’. By referring to different repertoires of common good, ‘orders of worth’, social actors seek to authorize their arguments. The exercise of legitimation occurs in critical situations that are characterized by uncertainty and a need for interpretation or definition. The point of interest for Boltanski and Thévenot is how social actors reach agreement (or agreement about disagreement) in critical situations. They refer to this as an ‘exigence for agreement’ or ‘exigence for coordination’ [48, 54: 106]. This approach demonstrates different ways in which people justify their viewpoints by pointing out the collective benefits for society.<sup>7</sup> Making such hierarchies relevant in diverse situations—whether at work or during leisure time—is a matter of the actor’s ability to mobilise arguments, values, people and things. From this perspective, justifications always move beyond a particular or personal, idiosyncratic viewpoint. Unlike political and moral philosophers, Boltanski and Thévenot approach this issue by empirically analyzing how people put their arguments to the test. In our study we explore how the informants apply different arguments in order to justify their everyday familial lives. Boltanski and Thévenot (1991 [2006]) demonstrate the existence of six orders of worth in contemporary social reality, each order of worth governed unequivocally by a single dominant principle (see also [54: 113]). The six orders of worth are, as summarized in the table below, inspired, domestic, civic, opinion, market and industrial (Table 3).<sup>8</sup>

We will refer to them as ‘repertoires of evaluation’. The contributions from Lamont, Boltanski and Thévenot inspire us to see different spheres in the context of practical problems requiring knowledge, material objects and normative argumentation. Altogether, this comprises a theoretical toolbox for elucidating cultural repertoires of evaluation in a specific region in Norway.

In the following sections we outline and discuss the results of the study by describing how different repertoires of evaluation are mobilised when the informants justify their choices in relation to their adaptation to working life and to their familial lives.

## Gendered Adaptation to Working Life

Close study of the individual actors’ perceptions and reasons for life choices reveals a fairly complex picture, yet some repertoires of evaluation are mobilised more

<sup>7</sup> These approaches do not primarily look for hidden strategies of power, although they do not exclude the existence of such. Instead, they concentrate on situations where actors criticise other persons’ arguments or legitimate their own in order to map out which ‘orders of worth’ are mobilised in different situations and how situations are ‘stabilised’. Comparative studies show that such practices of appreciation, worth and critique have patterns that follow national cultural repertoires of evaluation [35: 8–9].

<sup>8</sup> Thévenot et al. [52] also suggest a possible new order of green worth, and Boltanski and Chiapello [5] (orig. 1999) suggest a possible project order of worth. We have not found them in our data, thus they are not included in the summary.

**Table 3** Schematic summary of orders of worth

	Market	Industrial	Civic	Domestic	Inspired	Opinion
Mode of evaluation (worth)	Price, cost	Technical efficiency	Collective welfare	Esteem, reputation	Grace, singularity, creativeness	Renown, fame
Test	Market competitiveness	Competence, reliability, planning	Equality and solidarity	Trustworthiness	Passion, enthusiasm	Popularity, audience, recognition
Form of relevant proof	Monetary	Measurable: criteria, statistics	Formal, official	Oral, exemplary, personally warranted	Emotional involvement and expression	Semiotic
Qualified objects	Freely circulating market good or service	Infrastructure, project, technical object, method, plan	Rules and regulations, fundamental rights, welfare policies	Patrimony, locale, heritage	Emotionally invested body or item: the sublime	Sign, media
Qualified human beings	Customer, consumer, merchant, seller	Engineer, professional, expert	Equal citizens, solidarity unions	Authority	Creative being	Celebrity
Time formation	Short-term, flexibility	Long-term planned future	Perennial	Customary past	Eschatological, revolutionary, visionary moment	Vogue, trend
Elementary relation	Exchange	Functional link	Solidarity	Trust	Passion	Recognition

Source: Boltanski and Thévenot [6], Thévenot et al. [52]

often than others when choices are justified. In the discussion of the issues of full-time or part-time work and the general division of labour outside the household, we see that the informants mobilise the industrial and the civic repertoires, or a combination of the two.

### The Industrial Repertoire of Evaluation

As Tables 1 and 2 reveal the proportion of women in the sample working part-time is considerably higher than that of men. A recurring justification pattern regarding the disposition of full-time and part-time work, relates to wages and the fact that men earn more money than women. When informants compare wages with their partner, elements of market justifications are made relevant (based on a common good where prices are the ultimate worth). However, the informants more frequently talk about efficiency and planning as the basic common good (industrial), and ensuring a safe and sound family economy is integral to this. The informants often regard the family as a unit to be managed as efficiently as possible, i.e. an *industrial repertoire of evaluation* is seen as relevant. In order to make best possible use of the family's time and resources, it is argued that it is most effective and profitable for them as a family if the woman works part-time. When explaining the division of labour, the informants implicitly point at horizontal gender segregation: the men tend to be in positions (often in the private sector where salaries are higher) where it is more difficult to work part-time. So, both among the families in which one of the parents works part-time or desires part-time work (in both cases the woman), they expressed a kind of pragmatic adaption to the way in which the labour market is (currently) composed and organised. Thus, they argue that for the family as a whole it is most effective and profitable if the woman works part-time. A male teacher explained:

I could not work 50 % while she worked 100 %. We could not afford it. But now that she earns more than me, I've reduced my position to 80 %. (M6SV)

A self-employed man explained that the division of work was partly a question of money, but also a question of what kind of occupation one had:

It is mostly the women who are at home, and often – but not always – this has to do with salaries. (...) When I was working 80 %, I worked in a municipality. I got 80 % salary but was expected to do the same job. (M5SV)

A woman told us that her husband had a much higher income than she could possibly have:

For most people [in our circle of friends] the situation is quite similar; he earns incredibly much more than her. Nearly all of them are engineers working in the North Sea and the like. (W8T)

The family is *the unit* the informants primarily relate to, and they struggle to administrate the family as efficiently as possible, both financially and time-wise. Faced with a regionally homogeneous labour market, the informants pragmatically accept a solution where women take the greater share of responsibility for domestic



duties. In practice, women use most of the parental leave entitlement, they work part-time more often than men, and they are the ones who most frequently stay at home when the children are ill. Thus, regardless of initiatives from above to promote gender equality, in line with the so-called state feminism, the reality on the ground (unequal salaries, a homogenous labour market) is designed to prohibit a mobilisation of women from below, since that would be a less efficient way to run the family unit. Hence, the informants mobilise the industrial repertoire of evaluation (sometimes in combination with market evaluations) in their adaptation to working life.

### The Civic Repertoire of Evaluation

Justifications based on civic equality or solidarity refer to collective welfare as the standard of evaluation and propose or oppose to projects based on such goals as equal access and protection of civil rights [52: 246]. Despite their pragmatic adaptation to the work-family balance, many female informants find the solution unfair. They manage and justify their current situation, while at the same time remaining conscious about the national gender policy. A female informant told us that she had worked half-time for a period, but that was not what she preferred:

A: In our relationship, my husband is just as good as me when it comes to taking care of kids and such.

Q: Would he be allowed by his employer to work in a reduced position?

A: No, that is not certain at all. It is stricter where he works. When you have a job you will come to work every day. It is like that in many male-dominated occupations. (W4SV)<sup>9</sup>

Another younger female informant argued along the same lines:

It must be accepted [by employers] that [fathers] are at home with children. It must be as natural for fathers to take parental leave and it must be as natural for them to stay at home when the kids are ill. You know, things like that. My husband is working in a male dominated profession - there are hardly any women there, so he says: “Can’t you stay at home? I have to go to work.” But I have to go to work as well, I have a job too. I want this to be equal. (W1SV).

Many informants link gender equality to the workplace. However, gender equality as a phenomenon is associated with the *civic repertoire of evaluation* by the informants. At the heart of their reasoning lies citizens’ freedom and rights, equal pay, solidarity, equality, etc. In general, the discussion on gender equality has gone through various phases, from open discrimination (women are not allowed), gender-neutral legislation (formal equal rights), and special arrangements (affirmative action) to what is now called gender-integrated policies (gender mainstreaming) where gender issues are taken into account in all cases and policy issues [43: 142]. It is obvious that the informants relate gender equality to equal pay. However, we

<sup>9</sup> A: Answer. Q: Question.

interpret the informants' understanding of equality as something more than formal equality. Many of them suggest something similar to equality of opportunity. We find a close affinity between the informants' understanding of equality and what Gudmund Hernes has termed the 'concept of equality of opportunity' [25]. Implementation of such a concept of equality means the removal of the effects of social class, gender and ethnicity. In our interpretation, the informants request a culture in the working place and the labour market based on the realisation of such a type of equality. The civic repertoire of evaluation could presumably foster a mobilisation of women from below. When this mobilisation fails to occur we have to look at how these repertoires interrelate.

### A Compromise Between the Industrial and the Civic Repertoires of Evaluation

Taking into consideration the current situation, the informants have found pragmatic adaptations to working life, sufficiently family-efficient within a not yet gender-equal labour market and within a male-dominated work culture. Their arguments and *critiques* are supported by a *compromise between the industrial and the civic repertoires of evaluation*. Boltanski and Thévenot explain this compromise:

(...) industrial and civic worths are the objects of intense compromise efforts, especially in French society, as we have seen in our examination of Durkheim's political philosophy. The figure of the *worker*, supported by the arrangements of unionism and by the equipment of labour laws, has its origin in this work of compromise [7: 325].

An example of this central compromise is what Boltanski and Thévenot call 'workers' rights', and workers' rights are exactly what some informants make relevant in their justifications of gendered division of work and in their critique of regional work culture. It appears provocative that the cultures of different workplaces are unable to offer equality of opportunity for men and women. We would argue that the compromise between the industrial and the civic repertoires of evaluation are as central to the Norwegian model as it is in French society. As outlined above, many government-initiated activities aimed at strengthening women's status and rights are institutionalised in Norway. Following Hernes [26], we can argue that the *women-friendly policies from above*, conceptualised as 'state feminism', represent a gendered expression of the strength of this compromise. It is clear that many (but not all) informants mobilise this compromise and make it relevant in their discussions of work, gender and equality. They use this compromise in a critique of both the gendered inequality of the labor market in the region and the male-dominated work culture.<sup>10</sup> Both men and women argue for a need to expand gender equality at the workplace. There seems to be an acceptance for the idea of state feminism connected to the development of gender balance in the working sphere. Even in this conservative region in Norway one can attach the

<sup>10</sup> In addition, there are also some informants who used the domestic repertoire of justifications when discussing work, but when the conversations explicitly turned to division of labour and gender equality, the civic repertoire seemed to displace the domestic.

actors' arguments into a form of 'liberal feminist concept of equality'. Only one informant articulated hostility towards a controversial arrangement such as gender-based affirmative action. Thus, our findings suggest a widespread consensus towards the government-initiated women-friendly policy from above to such a degree that the policy seems to be culturally embedded and made available for individual justifications. In other words, one could have expected a stronger mobilisation of women from below, even though the industrial repertoire of evaluation justifies traditional gendered practices of work-family reconciliation.

### **Traditional Gender Roles in the Family Sphere**

However, when we changed the subject in the interviews and focused more directly on the division of labour within the family, a different picture emerged. We still find, as we shall see, justifications including arguments where evaluations depend on efficiency and planning (industrial), yet another distinct category of arguments becomes even more important, namely that of the domestic repertoire.

#### **A Compromise Between the Domestic and the Industrial Repertoire of Evaluation**

The domestic repertoire of evaluation relies on justifications where traditions are valued and are constantly being revisited in making judgements about the present. Evaluations of this type support hierarchies of reputation and trustworthiness [52: 249]. First, we recall that the past decades bear witness to a tremendous societal change which influenced the division of labour inside the household, also in the region of Agder. On a national level, men have taken on more domestic responsibility and women have increased their efforts in working life [32]. Agder is by all means strongly influenced by this societal change. Our empirical findings clearly support the general view that men today take a lot more responsibility at home than before. But there are still differences between men and women concerning who does what, and the amount of domestic work that they do [53]. These general differences are somewhat reflected in the interviews. The men in the sample report to have primary responsibility for the external maintenance of the house, the boat, the car, the lawn-mowing, etc.; in other words, most of the practical work taking place outdoors. Some take part in cooking, but cleaning and tidying etc. inside the house appear to be the women's domain. The women report quite similar to the men, but there are some differences. More women than men work part-time, thus they have more responsibilities at home. This is in line with the industrial repertoire of evaluation, in which it is the efficient management of the family as unit that is at stake. Similar findings appear in USA where there seemed to be less and less time for the 'second shift' (at home) transforming the family into a Taylorized institution with few rewards and many requirements [27, 28]. However, our data also suggest that the women who work full-time (or almost full-time) still do more housework than their partners. In our conversations with the informants about who

should/could take responsibility in the household and in the family sphere, men used arguments such as:

(...) My wife wanted it... (M4T).

(...) In the early days, my wife was always at home... (M3SV).

(...) I believe she wants to stay at home more than I do... (M6T).

The women put it somewhat differently:

(...) It was a desire to be more with our kids, and I wanted to work less ... (W6T)

(...) untraditional choices ..., I think that would appear strange among our friends... (W8T)

The *domestic repertoire of evaluation* is culturally embedded, highlighting values such as tradition, duty, traditional kinship relations, etc. In applying this repertoire the informants made relevant their own upbringing (and many grew up with housewives as mothers), history, conformity, and respect for what they believed were their partners' wishes. For instance, a university college-educated woman in her early thirties explained:

I have chosen to spend a lot of time at home, and I have always had a stay-at-home mother myself. And I know the feeling of coming home from school, opening the door, shouting to Mummy "Hello" or "What's for dinner?" I knew that she was always there. (W1SV)

By contrast, the importance of the domestic repertoire of evaluation was considered a burden for those women who emphasized the importance of a professional career. Several informants felt the expectations of traditional gender roles. For instance, being a 'career woman' was not always perceived as something positive. A woman with a profiled career stated:

We hear: "My God, she has three kids, but she goes to work every day." (W3SV).

In this regional context, where a culture supporting traditional gender roles seems to be dominant, the national culture of gender equality co-exists as a counterculture. A couple of the informants mentioned that in their circle of friends it would be unnatural if women did not work full-time. A female informant would expect her friends to be surprised if she suddenly reduced her position. Her friends would have interpreted such a reduction as being a result of her husband's desire, not her own. The data suggest a polarisation between groups within which it is expected that women should work full-time (they criticise the domestic repertoire of evaluation) and groups within which it is expected that the women should work part-time (they mobilise the domestic repertoire to justify their choices). The domestic repertoire of evaluation was also mobilised when we introduced parental leave into the discussions. Even when we take into account the fact that several of the informants had young children a few years ago, the father's use of parental leave was relatively

modest. In Norway parental leave entitlement was 12 months with full salary or 10 months with 80 % salary when the interviews were conducted. Parents choose how they want to split the leave, but legislative changes were recently implemented with the intention of increasing the paternal share of the parental leave.<sup>11</sup> Those men in the sample who had taken more parental leave than was imposed upon them stood out. As outlined above, the men believed that the women wanted to stay at home during this period. Some women had suggested that their partner should take more of the parental leave, but this was often declined by their partners. Nonetheless, we did not identify any frustration among the women about the fact that they took out most of the leave. They believed the common perception to be that it was somewhat unnatural for men to take out long parental leave, and acted accordingly. In addition, considering the gendered imbalance in income, most families would be economically worse off if the man stayed at home on long leave instead of the woman.

Several of the informants (men and women) explicitly expressed that they were *not concerned* about doing just as much of everything, i.e. a 50–50 split of all domestic duties. What did concern them, however, was that the overall workload (housework and professional) should be the same for both parents, and that all duties within in the family should be divided in a family-efficient way. Thus, also when the informants were discussing domestic duties and parental leave, they mobilised the *industrial repertoire of evaluation* by focusing on utility and efficiency. The informants were keen to spread the burden equally, but it appears that the role of mothers and fathers are quite different; solid demarcations between maternal and paternal parenting emerge. Based on our data, the men could be described as *participating* or *activity fathers*. As such, they also represent a bridge to the world outside the home—the public sphere—and can be viewed as promoters of developmental support and social participation. Indeed, women are involved in such activities as well, but to what appears to be a lesser extent. Women are *administrative managers* and the main *caregivers*. Our data also indicate that women still take care of much of the housework. Consequently, the study expands our knowledge of mechanisms within the regional cultural practice where *the maternal role of protector is a necessary condition for the paternal role of participator*. But even this division of labour within the family may be linked to a feminist position, namely ‘feminist concepts of difference’ interpreted in the essentialist way where complementarity between the genders is assumed. The informants used such arguments explicitly (we are different and therefore do different things) and more implicitly by referring to tradition and habits. When it comes to family life, the conservative and traditional elements in the region, i.e. the domestic repertoire, are mobilised in the justification of gender differences. Previous studies show that Norwegian women in general often prefer part time work [14]. However, women in Agder work less than elsewhere in the country and they have more traditional values [17]. By widening the comparison we see that the main difference between the Norwegian and the American context [28] is the role of the state. The Norwegian welfare state and its ‘state feminism’ has reduced parents’

<sup>11</sup> In recent years the paternal quota has been the subject of heated public debate; see Ellingsæter [15] for a discussion.

dependency of the family as producer of welfare services. Esping-Andersen [20] even introduced the concept of a ‘defamiliarization’ system to describe the social-democratic welfare state. Perhaps somewhat in contrast to what might have been expected, the informants were accepting of the idea of ‘state feminism’ connected to the development of gender balance in the working sphere (thus being aware of the ‘defamiliarization’ system), but *simultaneously* embracing traditional family values and norms. Our analysis suggests a closely connected compromise between the domestic and the industrial repertoires of evaluation when it comes to the informants’ understandings of and discussions about family life. In our interpretation the process of justifying the division of domestic duties is embedded in a culture, characteristic of Agder, where the overall value is to create a family life so harmoniously and efficiently as possible. Of particular interest are the differences between men and women’s activities aimed at keeping this compromise together. We observed a cultural practice which, to borrow Desrosières terminological suggestion, reveals ‘how to make things which hold together’ [12]. In the effort invested by parents to keep the compromise as something which ‘holds together’, it is suddenly not important for the parents to do the same—in the sense of equal—duties; what is important is that the amount of duties is shared equally.

The compromise between the industrial and the domestic repertoires of evaluation might not be unique for the Agder region. However, former research underpin that traditional and conservative values are strong in this region [17, 18], making it an interesting case for study. In particular, the domestic repertoire appears to have a firm standing in the region and is constantly reaffirmed, making counter-practices, such as career-seeking women, divergent.

## Conclusion

We have tried to show how the informants seek pragmatic solutions in their sharing of paid work and family life. In addition, we intended to grasp how the choices are justified in a regional culture known (also by the informants) as the least gender-equal in Norway. Some informants expressed conflicts of norms, but we suggest that the coexistence of two normative compromises stabilize the current situation. The present analysis provides insight into how the informants mobilise two different normative compromises according to what is being discussed in the interviews. In discussions on work and gender, many (but not all) make relevant a compromise between the industrial (efficiency) and civic repertoires (equality and solidarity) of evaluation,<sup>12</sup> while discussions on the distribution of tasks and roles within the family were supported by a compromise between the domestic (conservative traditions) and industrial repertoires. On the one hand, there is an acceptance of government-initiated gender policy when it comes to gender equality in work and politics, while on the other hand the local culture is hesitant to create opportunities for changes from below,

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<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the industrial and civic repertoires were also supported by the domestic repertoire of evaluation in this context.

presumably the type of changes necessary to influence gender roles within the family. Consequently, a particular distribution of gendered activity seems to accompany the transition to the ‘adult worker family model’ in the region. Women continue to do many of the tasks from the housewife era, while men have become important facilitators and contributors, especially in the part of children’s lives that has to do with activities and play. In this new model for organising family life, the informants call for more equality in the workplace, showing a close affinity to a liberal feminist position embedded in the national culture of equality, yet, simultaneously, they continue to practice gender differences within the family that are closely linked to an essentialist feminism of difference embedded in the local culture of conservative values and norms. So, despite the fact that the informants are both conscious about gender equality and explain and justify their own life choices in a convincing way, a reproductive pattern might occur. By observing and adopting the behaviour of their parents there is a chance that children inherit these gendered practices, thus adding to the gender inequality that is so firmly embedded in the region.

We argue that the cultural pragmatic approach where people justify life choices by referring to a principle of a ‘common good’ allows us to steer clear of two pitfalls. First, we avoid ending up in the critical position in which the sociologist is given exclusive rights to unmask others false consciousness’ and by virtue of this exclusivity can tell others how they should live their lives. Secondly, we prevent the acceptance of the position that regards individual choice as context independent and “free”. Our view is that the interviewees make well-informed choices within the framework the regional culture regards as legitimate. In our interpretation people in Agder are concerned with gender equality (liberal feminists in the work sphere, difference feminists in the family sphere). However, as pointed out above, this might lead to gendered socialization practices.

Similar attitudes towards the division of labor within the family are found in other parts of Norway [13: 69, 1]. Nevertheless, our hypothesis is that the cultural compromise between the domestic and the industrial repertoires is *particularly* strong in southern Norway (historically because of the regionally strong position of religion, political conservatism and the prevalence of traditional gender roles) and possibly the impact of the compromise on the gender gap is larger here than elsewhere in Norway since the economic structures (homogeneous labor market) and the political structures (low female participation in politics) have not encouraged changes. It is obviously beyond the scope of this article to discuss the dialectics between economic- and political structures and the regional culture. However, we need to point out that the cultural dimension we have discussed as normative compromises, presumably have greater reproductive socialization consequences in a region with fewer economic and political career paths (homogeneous labor, low female participation in politics) than in a region with a more complex work and organizational life. Or in other words: The women-friendly policy from above is accepted by our informants, but apparently perceived more as rhetoric than reality and therefore they reluctantly participate in woman-friendly changes from below.<sup>13</sup> Implications of findings from this study contribute to the ongoing international

<sup>13</sup> Or maybe a ‘different political framing of care’ is needed [9].

discussion by revealing a continued need for further reflection on the complex and context-dependent relations between gender inequality and culture.

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